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Architectural History of Bryn Mawr College

Bryn Mawr College, one of the most beautiful academic settings in the country, is also one of the most historically significant campuses. Founded in 1885 by a prominent Friends physician, Dr. Joseph Taylor, planning of the campus grounds and construction of the first buildings began as early as 1879. In 1979, nine of the College's buildings were named to the National Register of Historic Buildings: Taylor and Merion Halls (1884-1885), Radnor Hall (1887), Denbigh Hall (1891), Dalton Hall (1893), Pembroke East and West (1894), the M. Carey Thomas Library (1906), and the Gymnasium (1909). This year, which marks the Centennial of the establishment of the College, the campus is under consideration for designation as an Historic Landmark.

The beauty of the campus is linked with the ideals of the College's founding a century ago. Plans for the College were carefully laid during the Victorian period, when the education of women was viewed as a means for improving society. Bryn Mawr was designed for the goals summarized by first President James Rhoads: that of "elevating standards of taste, giving nobleness to social aims, and promoting living to the highest ends." The first dean at Bryn Mawr, M. Carey Thomas, believed strongly that women's education should be equal to that received by men. It was she who determined that the later campus buildings be designed in Jacobean Gothic style, after the distinguished men's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. Through "architecture by association," Bryn Mawr became a scholar's retreat in the manner of her European ancestors, linking higher education in America with that of the European universities.

In choosing a site for the campus, Dr. Taylor desired a proximity to Haverford College, an institution founded by Friends in 1833 so that, as he later wrote, "Professors, a library, an observatory, a meeting house, and even gas and water, could be shared by the two institutions." Not intended as an annex of Haverford, Bryn Mawr was located far enough away to "tend to the more untrammelled and vigorous growth of both institutions." Today, the two colleges form a "two-College community," sharing academic and social interests, yet remaining distinct institutions. President Rhoads felt that the College should also be near Philadelphia, "where the benefit of professors and literary and scientific aids could be had, also some social influences." Bryn Mawr is located eleven miles west of Philadelphia.

After the site for the College had been chosen, the piecemeal assembly of the College grounds was begun. Thirty-two acres between Merion, Roberts, Gulph, and Yarrow Roads were selected for the campus. Frederick Law Olmsted, noted landscape designer, drew up a master landscape plan. His plan for framing the boundaries of the campus with buildings and maintaining a central open green space has been followed as new buildings have been added during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The first buildings were designed by Addison Hutton, an architect who had several Philadelphia office buildings to his credit. With Dr. Taylor as active overseer, Hutton designed the administrative and classroom building Taylor Hall (1879) and residential Merion Hall (1879), as well as the College's first gymnasium. In viewing the first three buildings, it

is apparent that Hutton followed the advice given him by Board of Directors's President Francis King, who communicated the image desired for Bryn Mawr in a letter from June 1879: "There is a certain style of 'Quaker lady' dress, which I often see in Philadelphia, which tells the whole story--she has her satin bonnet, her silk dress, her kid gloves, her perfect slippers--but they are made to harmonize with the expression of her face which is both intellectual and holy--so may (the) College look down from its beautiful site upon the passing world and we hear them say 'just right.'"

Taylor Hall originally housed nearly all of the College facilities--classrooms and laboratories, offices, the library and chapel. Finished in 1884, the Victorian Gothic structure exemplifies a nineteenth-century trend for recalling older architectural styles. The Victorian Gothic style was made popular in the nineteenth century by art critic John Ruskin, so Hutton's use of the style was not unusual. But Hutton's design for the exterior of the building, done in monochromatic gray stone, differs from the popular polychromatic stone mode established by Philadelphia architect Frank Furness. Four stories high, with silhouetting and engraving details lightening its serious exterior, the building supports a bell tower bracketed by cut blue stones. The stone steps leading to an entrance beneath the tower are referred to as the "senior steps"; tradition has it that bad luck befalls those underclassmen who ascend these steps before their senior year.

Hutton managed to please everyone with Taylor Hall. Austere enough to suit the serious intentions of the College founders, stately as a "Quaker lady" without being too conspicuous, Taylor

Hall was an architectural success. Today, the building still houses many of Bryn Mawr's classrooms and administrative offices.

For Bryn Mawr's first dormitory, Hutton again considered the plans made by the founder. Taylor had envisioned four small cottages housing about forty women each, connected by a common dining hall. The design was intended to create a village-like atmosphere, while reducing congestion. But although the plan showed advanced thinking and, in fact, set a useful example for buildings on other campuses, the cost of duplicating heating and plumbing systems was prohibitive. Instead, Hutton devised separate cottages, each with its own dining hall. The first of these, Merion Hall, is a four-story structure also of Victorian Gothic design, its monochromatic gray stone interrupted by a porched front entrance. The original floor plans included spacious rooms opening from wood-trimmed hallways, and were each equipped with fireplaces and window seats. Unfortunately, as the first classes of women complained, the male architect had omitted closets, believing wardrobes would provide enough space for clothing. Modern renovation of Merion has included both the redivision of space to accommodate more students, and the addition of adequate closet space in every room. Modern lighting fixtures have replaced outdated and dangerous gas lamps, but light still penetrates the stairways through stained glass windows.

In 1883, Hutton designed a red brick gymnasium which stood in line with Merion; in 1909 this gym was replaced to meet the needs of a growing student body. Nicknamed "the Castle" for its fortress-like appearance, the building designed by Philadelphia architects Walter Cope and John Stewardson is a gray stone square flanked by round towers and featuring a tiny basement swimming

pool with lion head spigots adorning one end. It now functions as the Campus Center.

Schooled at the University of Zurich, Dean M. Carey Thomas was familiar with European architecture and interested in the relationship between architectural beauty and intellectual pursuits. A new pair of architects, John Stewardson and Walter Cope, replaced Hutton to carry out the ambitious plan of "architecture by association." Their work resulted in the addition of four dormitories, a science hall, the gymnasium, and the M. Carey Thomas Library. Their work was done between 1886 and 1909.

Cope, who had worked for Hutton, and Stewardson, who had worked for Frank Furness, emerged as two of the century's most influential architects as a result of their designs for Bryn Mawr College. The stone used by Cope and Stewardson marked the first change in style from the buildings designed by Hutton: lighter in tone, Cope and Stewardson's buildings appeared less austere. Adapting the towers, crenellations, and battlements of the English universities, the two men brought the scholar's ivory tower to the campus in the form of the "collegiate Gothic" style. Radnor (1887), Denbigh (1893), Pembroke East and West (1894), Rockefeller (1904), and the M. Carey Thomas Library (1906), marked an architectural first in the United States. The new style became a symbol of academic life, and the two architects were later commissioned by Princeton, Cornell, the University of Missouri, Washington University in St. Louis, and the University of Pennsylvania.

The interiors of the buildings are equally elegant. In the dormitories, wall sconces bearing gas lamps glowed in the dark wood-trimmed halls, leaded and wood-framed windows were many-paned,

spiral staircases with carved bannisters led to rooms with window seats. Every dorm includes a large living room area; recent renovation has included refurbishing these public rooms in Victorian period colors--yellow, ochre, and brown.

Pembroke and Rockefeller Halls were designed with arches which opened the fortress of buildings into the center green. The "owl gate" at Rockefeller, with stone owls tucked into the arch, opens the campus from the corner of Yarrow and Merion streets. An arch dividing the east and west sides of Pembroke Hall, flanked by stone lions bearing shields decorated with the symbol of Pallas Athena, serves as the Merion Avenue entrance to the College. A road leads from Pembroke arch into Merion Green, which is dissected by two rows of tall trees, making up the "Senior Row" through which generations of May Day hoop-rollers and Commencement day victors continue to pass.

When M. Carey Thomas became president of the College in 1894, College architecture took a turn for the exotic. In the Thomas Library, Cope and Stewardson indulged her with an outdoor cloistered area in the center of the structure, containing a fountain and adorned with grotesques designed by English carver Alec Miller. The glory of Thomas is the spacious Great Hall, once the main study room of the library, where musical performances and the daily Coffee Hour now take place. The ceiling is high and huge lead-paned windows let in the afternoon sunlight, creating a cathedral-like effect. Thomas, pleased with the results, claimed to have had a major role in bringing the great hall of Wadham College, Oxford, to her campus. At a memorial talk acknowledging the achievements of Walter Cope, she boasted, "Our Bryn Mawr buildings are truly original in their adaptation of Jacobean

Gothic--and possess more Romance and Charm than any except the most beautiful of the older colleges at Cambridge and Oxford, and they are in themselves far more sympathetic and satisfying than any of the many college buildings erected in England after Jacobean models."

Outdated as a library, Thomas Hall later underwent renovation to transform existing basement space, formerly the stacks area, into academic offices and classrooms, a projection area and store room for the Art and Archaeology departments, and an Art and Archaeology library. The Mariam Coffin Canaday Library, built in 1970, took over the bulk of the library's holdings.

A succession of College presidents took on the challenges of expanded enrollment, which demanded the addition of new dorms and academic buildings. Goodhart Hall, the College's main auditorium for speakers and musical and dramatic productions, was completed in 1928. With its arched ceilings, towers, heavy studied wood doors, and giant wrought-iron lamps, Goodhart lends a medieval look to the campus. In 1937, the residence hall named after first President James Rhoads was built, and remains today the largest of the dormitories. Marking the beginning of a growing concern for the expense of erecting Gothic buildings, Park Hall, the science building added in 1938, was done in inexpensive modern gray brick. Containing the lecture rooms, laboratories, and academic offices for the natural sciences, Park Hall was expanded in 1958 and in 1963 to meet an increase in interest in the sciences among entering Bryn Mawr women. Dalton Hall, the former science building designed by Cope and Stewardson in 1891, was given over to classrooms, laboratories, and offices for the social sciences.

After World War II, modern architecture moved toward the forceful, direct, useful style, and campuses across the country replaced older, less efficient housing and academic buildings with no-nonsense structures. At Bryn Mawr, incandescent and later fluorescent lighting replaced costly and dangerous gas lamps, plumbing systems were modernized, and heating and cooling systems centralized. But the negative result of modernization--a separation of residential and academic life seen on other campuses--did not take place at Bryn Mawr. Renovation of existing structures and a concentration on blending the newer buildings with the older ones to maintain the spirit of the original campus helped the College avoid this unfortunate split.

In 1965, Louis Kahn, who updated the rowhouse with his designs for Philadelphia public housing, designed a dormitory called Erdman Hall. Intended to be a modern version of a Scottish castle, Erdman's gray slate exterior is sparsely adorned. With its three units connected by a common dining hall and living space, the floor plan incorporates the "village" plan of dormitory considered by Hutton at the founding of the College. Haffner Hall, a modern red-brick language house for German, Spanish, Italian, and French speakers, was designed by I.W. Colburn and associates in 1971. The three separate buildings are joined as a "European village" by a common court yard and dining hall.

Perhaps the most urgent need was fulfilled in 1970, with the construction of the Mariam Coffin Canaday Library. The company of Kilham, Beder, and Chu undertook the project, producing a four-story structure with stack areas for over 500,000 volumes, multi-level study areas, a periodicals room, basement space for a word-processing center, as well as areas for the College's

collection of rare books, archives, and memorabilia. Separate libraries for art and archaeology are maintained in Thomas Hall; the natural sciences library is in Park Hall, and a social science library is in Dalton Hall.

Along with an increasing interest in the sciences, Bryn Mawr encourages a growing concern with physical fitness among its students. In 1984 the Cope and Stewardson gym (1909) was replaced. Architect Daniel Tully designed the new Bern Schwartz Gymnasium. Tully's successful designs for sport complexes at Brown, Amherst, and Vassar made him well-prepared to tackle the athletic needs of Bryn Mawr women. Assembled on the site from pre-fabricated sections, the \$4.1 million dollar complex contains a swimming pool, weight room, locker rooms for faculty and students, indoor courts, and a dance studio, and is covered by Tully's patented roof line. The Cope and Stewardson "Castle" is currently undergoing renovation to change its status to that of a campus center.

In accommodating growing needs, the campus itself was expanded beyond the original plan of Olmsted. In 1975, a building and eight acres of land one and a half miles west of the campus were acquired for Bryn Mawr's Social Work campus. Glenmede, the graduate residence center one half-mile north of the main campus, was donated in 1980.

In 1978, Pennsylvania historian George Thomas, serving as a visiting lecturer in Bryn Mawr's Growth and Structure of Cities Program, described the effect of the architecture at the College: "Bryn Mawr retains the structure of the democratic village around the green, recalling the New England town with work, residence, civic functions, and government all sharing common

frontage, and representing the whole life possible in a fully integrated society."

Such was the intention of the early planners of Bryn Mawr College, and significant is the fact that the intention is maintained today. Bryn Mawr alumna Leslie Webb '78, a history major, called official attention to the architecture of the College, as her senior history project. As a result of the work she began, Bryn Mawr College was designated an historic district in June 1979; in recognition both of the architectural significance of its early buildings and of the historic role Bryn Mawr has played in providing outstanding graduate and undergraduate educational opportunities for women. In this Centennial year, the College is being considered for designation as a National Historic Landmark.